

Monkey Boy

Author: Donovan Bixley

Synopsis

Jimmy Grimholt is the youngest sailor aboard warship *H.M.S. Fury*. As such he is given the job of being “Monkey Boy”. His role is to carry the gunpowder back and forth from the barrels to the cannons during battle. This job is extremely dangerous, but Jimmy has more immediate things to worry about aboard the ship. He is bullied and tormented by another youngster called Finbar, and his gang. His sea daddy Will spends most of his time berating him and clipping him around the head and worst of all, Lieutenant Nancy has it in for him. Nancy is a cruel and vindictive man who likes to set Jimmy impossible tasks to complete so that he can punish him when he fails. To top it all off, Jimmy has a secret. He can see the ghosts of dead people and communicate with them. Most of the time Jimmy considers this a curse, but when *H.M.S. Fury* comes under attack from a French warship, he wonders if maybe he could use the ghosts to his advantage...

Text Type

This book advertises itself as part novel, part comic, all action, and it doesn't disappoint! Bixley's novel is fast-paced and exciting. It has broad appeal but will be most popular with boys because it is full of violence and graphic descriptions of gruesome horrors. Bixley's illustrations are amazing and really bring the story to life. The fact that parts of the novel are told in comic book form will encourage even the most reluctant readers.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Prologue (pp. 6–16), Parts 1 and 2 (pp. 17–154) and Parts 3 and 4 (pp. 155–288).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Discuss the setting of the story with students and have them compare Jimmy's life in the 1800s with their own lives in the 21st century. Encourage students to identify main themes and ideas. Have students think about their own views about ghosts and the paranormal. Students should make inferences and predict what will happen next in the story. They should examine the main character Jimmy, his behaviour and motivations. Most importantly, have students read and enjoy the novel, entering a world of suspended disbelief where ghosts wreak havoc, action abounds and Jimmy overcomes the odds to become a hero.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Why do you think the novel might be called *Monkey Boy*?
- Where is the story set?
- Who is the main character?
- What do you think the author means by “cotton-candy capers”?
- What do you expect from a book which is part novel, part comic and all action?

Teacher reads Prologue (pp. 6–16) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Prologue (pp. 6–16)

- Where and when is the story set?
- What is The Head?
- Why does Jimmy have so much trouble using the toilet? Why does he hate the rag?
- What does Jimmy see coming at him from the shadows? How does Jimmy feel when the apparition raises its arms at him?
- How does Jimmy get knocked off the toilet seat? Why does he decide to risk his safety to retrieve his pants?
- What is surprising about the second Thing?
- What is a “landlubber”?

Discussion

- What do you think The Thing might be? What evidence is there in the story to suggest that this is not the first time Jimmy has seen one?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of being able to see the dead?
- What do we learn about the *H.M.S. Fury* from the prologue?
- What do you think will happen next in the story?

Students read Parts 1 and 2 (pp. 17–154) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Parts One and Two (pp. 17–154)

- What does H.M.S. stand for? How many men are aboard the ship? How many cannons does it carry? What is the purpose of the ship?
- Where does Jimmy come from? Why is he so eager to escape from there?
- What happens to Mumbles when he tries to jump from *Pickle* to *Fury*? How is he rescued? What happens when Jimmy tries to jump across? Why isn't he crushed?
- What is Mumbles' fate?
- Why is Jimmy disappointed when he sees the Ratings Officer's face?
- What does the Officer mean when he says that each coastal town is expected to provide a quota of men?
- Who is England defending itself from?
- What does Jimmy do to draw attention to himself and anger the Officer? How does the Officer respond?
- Why does Jimmy's meeting with Lieutenant Nancy make him rethink his decision to join the navy?
- Where does Lieutenant Nancy take Jimmy? Who is Will? What job is Jimmy given? What does it require him to do?
- What is an "idler"?
- Why does Will whack Jimmy over the head?
- How does Jimmy react when he sees Jasper? Why does Jasper think that Jimmy is a boy, not a man?
- What happened to the last monkey boy?
- What does Will mean when he tells Jimmy to start learning the ropes? What are some of the tasks that the gun crew are responsible for? What kind of teacher is Will? What part of being a sailor does Jimmy excel at?
- Describe the food on *Fury*. Why do the men tap their biscuits on the side of their plates? What trick do the men play on Jimmy?
- Describe Jimmy's sleeping quarters.
- Why wasn't Jimmy's dad around much while he was growing up?
- Describe Jimmy's room mates. Why does Jimmy annoy them so much? What do they do to Jimmy to put him in his place? How does Jimmy know that he can endure their bullying?

- What realisation does Jimmy come to when Finbar approaches him on the deck? What stops the boys from removing Jimmy's clothes?
- What is Bosun's daughter? What does earning a kiss with it mean?
- Why does Nancy send Jimmy into the hold? What does Nancy threaten him with if he fails to complete his task?
- Why is Jimmy surprised when he steps off the ladder into the hold? Why does he have trouble getting into the mizzen store? Why is Jimmy apprehensive about entering the room?
- How does Jimmy solve the problem of the salted peas?
- Describe the creature that Jimmy sees crawling out of the barrel. Why doesn't Jimmy want to run through the poltergeist? How does he escape?
- What is Jimmy's secret curse?
- Why does Jimmy think that being aboard Fury is worse than being in Puddleditch?
- In what ways is Lieutenant Hilary different from Nancy? What task does he ask Jimmy to complete? Why is Jimmy fascinated by what Hilary has in his office? Why does Jimmy like Hilary?
- Why is Jimmy so worried about the execution? How is the man killed? What is his crime?
- How does Jimmy know when the man is dead?
- Whose ghosts does Jimmy see after he is knocked off the Head?
- Describe Jimmy's reunion with his parents. Why does Jimmy find his parents' bickering oddly comforting?
- Why do ghosts smell worse the longer they remain on earth?
- How did Jimmy's mum die? What happened to his dad?
- How does Jimmy's Pa react when Jimmy tells him what his job is?
- Why does Jimmy think that the dead seek him out? Why does he dread coming across evil phantoms?

Discussion

- The ship's doctor comments that "there are more blasted accidents on this ship than death by battle". Why do you think this is? How are things different today?
- Why do you think the four boys bully Jimmy? Have you ever been the victim of bullying? How did it make you feel? What do you think the best way to deal with bullying is?
- Describe Jimmy's character. Why does his mouth sometimes get him into trouble?

- What do we learn about Jimmy's mother and father in this section of the novel? What lessons have they taught him that makes life aboard *Fury* a bit more bearable?
- Why do you think Jimmy's mum reacts the way she does when Jimmy reveals his secret to her? Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not?
- Is execution a fair punishment for treason? Why/why not?
- What do you think will happen in the story next?

Students read Parts 3 and 4 (pp. 155–288) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Parts 3 and 4 (pp. 155–288)

- Why is Jimmy apprehensive about going into the hold? What does Jimmy find in this room? Why isn't Jimmy concerned when he finally finds out what a monkey boy does? What prize do the first crew to hit all three targets receive?
- Why is Blasting Betty considered one of the most ferocious guns on the ship?
- How do the cannons work? What are the dangers of being around the cannons?
- Who takes Jimmy's third charge? Why doesn't Jimmy get into trouble with Will?
- Why were Royal Navy gunners the best in the world?
- Why does Jimmy feel satisfied after the practice?
- What does Will reveal about himself to Jimmy on the deck?
- Why can so few men in the navy swim?
- What injuries do the men in Jimmy's gun crew have? What happened to Admiral Melmouth? Why does Jimmy find this story so fascinating?
- What does Lieutenant Hilary give Jimmy as a reward?
- What do Finbar and his gang steal from Jimmy? Why does Finbar hate Jimmy so much? How do Jimmy's parents intervene when Finbar is tormenting Jimmy? Why do the boys run away terrified?
- Why don't Jimmy's parents want to move into the afterlife? Why does having his parents' ghosts around give Jimmy confidence?
- Where does Jimmy decide to hang his hammock?
- What is Lieutenant Nancy's first name? Why is his last name the bane of his life?

- Why does Jimmy speak up for Jasper? Who intervenes on his behalf?
- What is Reeves' punishment for interfering with an Officer's discipline?
- Why are the crew uncommonly quiet while Reeves is being whipped? Why is Lieutenant Nancy's word better than that of all the other men? Is he a better person than them? Why/why not?
- How does Jimmy decide to make amends to Reeves?
- Why is Jimmy determined to face the ghost in the mizzen store alone?
- Where does Melmouth Fury get his strength from? How does Jimmy convince him to let him take some rum? What cunning plan does Jimmy come up with to explain to Nancy why he and Will are above deck after curfew? How does Will nearly ruin the plan? Why do you think Hilary doesn't say anything about the rum?
- How does the fleet communicate while it is in formation?
- Describe the atmosphere aboard *Fury* as the men prepare for battle.
- Do you agree with Old Jasper when he says "there are worse things than death"? Why/why not?
- Why isn't the fight announced with ringing bells? How do the men prepare for the battle? Why does the fog make things difficult for the men?
- Describe the battle. Why is *Fury* so badly damaged? How does the battle reveal Nancy's true colours? Why is the battle particularly traumatic for Jimmy?
- How does Hilary die? What plan does he formulate so Jimmy will get out of the battle alive? How does Jimmy convince the men to continue fighting?
- Where does Jimmy want the men to aim for? Why does Mr Poe think that his plan needs "more luck than the gods"? Describe what happens when the men fire the cannons. What is the effect of the shot?
- How does Jimmy end up in the sea? Where is he when he wakes up? How is Jimmy rescued?
- Describe Jimmy's meeting with Admiral Kendall. What news does Kendall give Jimmy about the French fleet?
- Why do the other men consider Jimmy a hero?
- What happened to Finbar during the battle?
- Why is Jimmy confined to the sickbay?
- What happened to the men who died in the battle?

- How does Jimmy's gun crew react when he returns to his gun crew? What name does Jimmy come up with for the crew's new gun?

Discussion

- Describe Lieutenant Nancy. Why is he so cruel to the men on the ship? Why do you think that people who have been bullied often go on to bully others?
- What does the fact that Reeves intervenes on Jimmy's behalf reveal about his character? What other evidence is there in the story to suggest that the men are slowly warming to the young boy?
- What does Will mean when he says "arguing with 'em (Nancy) is like spitting into the wind? Why is it important to have discipline and a chain of command in the Navy? In what way can this lead to an abuse of power?
- How does Jimmy's character develop and change as the story progresses? What lesson do you think his experiences teach him?

Activities

Research – Complete a research project on whaling in the 1800s. Formulate 3 questions to focus your research. Gather your information from a range of written, visual and oral sources. Keep a log detailing your process and recording the details of the sources that you used. Present your findings as a webpage, report, power point or oral presentation.

Debate – Have a whole class debate on the moot "Ghosts really exist".

Writing – Write a letter to the author explaining what you liked about *Monkey Boy*.

Vocabulary – Choose 5 words from *Monkey Boy* which you are unfamiliar with. Use a dictionary to find out the meanings of the words and then use them each in a sentence.

Timeline – Complete a timeline of important events that occur in Jimmy's life.

Plot – Design a story board that shows 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration include a brief description about what is happening.

Setting – Write a paragraph that describes the setting of the story. Describe the *H.M.S. Fury* and explain how the time, place and social situation of the setting affects the action in the story.

Play – Choose an exciting event that occurs in the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to the class.

Character – Choose your favourite minor character in the story and write a description about them. Explain their role in the story and the qualities and characteristics they possess. Explain why you choose them as your favourite minor character.

Theme – Identify and explain a major theme that is developed in the novel.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd